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Republican, The (Springfield, MA)

May 9, 2009

Section: News

Edition: All

Page: A01

UMass drug lab may close

DAN RING STAFF The Republican (Springfield, MA)

dring@repub.com BOSTON - Citing budget cuts, state officials are considering closing the only Western Massachusetts laboratory used to analyze **drugs** seized by police.

The state Department of Public Health is eyeing possible closure of its laboratory at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. The **lab**, which employs several chemists and an evidence technician, performs 4,000 to 5,000 tests of **drugs** each year for municipal police departments in Western Massachusetts.

The **lab** currently has about a two-month backlog of analyses. It analyzes and weighs LSD, cocaine, heroin and other **drugs** confiscated in criminal cases. The **lab's** reports are used in trials, grand jury investigations and other criminal proceedings.

In a statement, Joseph Dorant, president of the Massachusetts Organization of State Engineers and Scientists, said he is concerned the fiscal crisis in state government could cause the **lab** to close.

"People don't realize the critical work that happens every day at a **lab** like this until there are cuts on the table," said Dorant, whose union represents employees at the Amherst **lab**. "The impact will be felt when cases take longer to prosecute. These are scientists who literally make the streets safer, and we can't afford to lose them."

Kevin M. Burnham, narcotics evidence officer for the Springfield Police Department, said the department takes seized **drugs** each week to the Amherst **lab** for testing.

The **lab** sometimes supplies results in four to five weeks. Burnham said the wait could climb to six to seven months if the department is required to use a **lab** in the eastern part of the state.

"It's absolutely, positively unbelievable they would close that **lab**," he said.

Jennifer L. Manley, spokeswoman for the state Department of Public, said the department is looking at a range of options to cut costs, including possible closures.

Manley would not comment on whether the Amherst laboratory is being considered for closure. No employees have been notified they will be laid off, she said.

She said it will take a couple of weeks to figure out how to comply with budget cuts.

The state House of Representatives cut the department's budget for **labs** to \$13.3 million for the fiscal year starting July 1, down 14 percent from this year. Officials said it's unlikely the Senate will restore money.

The Western Massachusetts Chiefs of Police Association e-mailed members saying closure of the **lab** might

mean police in the region would need to use a state police crime **lab** in Sudbury, about an hour's drive from Springfield, according to West Springfield Police Chief Thomas E. Burke.

Burke said it would be awful for police if the **lab** closes. He said it is another example of Western Massachusetts being shortchanged by Beacon Hill.

"They could care less about us out here," Burke said. "The state stops at (Route) 128."

Berkshire District Attorney David F. Capeless said he understands budget problems, but closing the **lab** would significantly affect public safety.

"I'm very concerned about it," said Capeless, who is president of the Massachusetts District Attorney's Association.

Capeless said a bigger backlog will build up if Western Massachusetts police are forced to take controlled substances to a **lab** in Boston or elsewhere for testing.

Trials could be delayed, he said. Defense lawyers will file more motions to dismiss charges on the grounds that evidence isn't available in a timely way, and prosecutors will seek more postponements.

Northampton Police Chief Russell P. Sienkiewicz said he is opposed to closing the **lab**. He said it doesn't appear there would be substantial savings.

It might save some money for the state, but it would increase costs and burn up time for local police departments, he said. The shutdown of the **lab** would also delay justice.

"It doesn't make sense to me," Sienkiewicz said.

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Republican, The (Springfield, MA)

July 17, 2009

Section: News

Edition: ALL

Page: C01

UMass drug lab given reprieve

DAN RING STAFF The Republican (Springfield, MA)

dring@repub.com Palmer's police chief hailed the decision to preserve the **lab**.

BOSTON - State officials plan to keep open the only Western Massachusetts laboratory used to analyze **drugs** confiscated by police.

Robert P. Frydryk, chief of police in Palmer and president of the Western Massachusetts Chiefs of Police Association, said he was glad the state decided against closing the state Department of Public Health **lab** at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, at least for this fiscal year.

"We'll use our temporary reprieve, if that's what it is, to do some serious lobbying," Frydryk said.

Jennifer L. Manley, spokeswoman for the state Department of Public Health, confirmed Thursday that the **lab** would stay open this fiscal year, but she couldn't immediately say why.

Manley had previously declined comment on whether the Amherst **lab** was considered for closure. She had said the department was looking at a range of options to cut costs including possible closures.

Employees and union representatives for the **lab**, however, said in early May that the **lab** was being targeted for closure because of budget cuts.

Joseph Dorant, president of the union that represents employees of the **lab**, said it was a real threat the **lab** could possibly shut down.

After Western Massachusetts police in early May criticized the possible closure, Dorant said that legislators added money for the state Department of Public Health budget for **labs**. The final budget for public health **labs** is \$13.6 million, down 13 percent, after about \$300,000 was added by the state Senate during the budget debate.

"The scientists at the Amherst **drug lab** play an important role for local police departments in prosecuting criminal **drug** cases," said Dorant, president of the Massachusetts Organization of State Engineers and Scientists.

David F. Capeless, district attorney in Berkshire County, said closure of the **lab** would have been horrible for Western Massachusetts.

Capeless pointed to a ruling by the Supreme Court last month that said defendants have a constitutional right to cross-examine **drug lab** analysts. That could mean that analysts from the Amherst **lab** would need to testify in trials, something that hasn't been necessary in the past, Capeless said.

Prosecutors have been able to use a certificate from the **lab** to show a particular substance was an illegal **drug**.

Capeless said. Without the Amherst **lab**, analysts from Boston would have needed to travel to Western Massachusetts to testify, he said.

If the **lab** closed, the Palmer police chief said law enforcement agencies in Western Massachusetts would have been forced to use a state police crime **lab** in Sudbury, about an hour's drive from Springfield and farther for police departments in the Berkshires.

"I'm glad they paused to give it some thought and decided to keep it open," Frydryk said. "It's a good thing for all the law enforcement agencies in Western Massachusetts."

The **lab** employs several chemists and an evidence technician. The **lab** performs 4,000 to 5,000 tests of **drugs** each year for municipal police departments in Western Massachusetts.

The **lab** analyzes and weighs illegal **drugs** such as LSD, cocaine, heroin and other **drugs** seized in criminal cases. Authorities use the **lab's** reports in trials, grand jury investigations and other criminal investigations.

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